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ABSTRACT

This document is a report on 1999 and 2000 fall credit student analysis. The study surveyed approximately 100,000 credit students at over 300 community colleges. The report focuses on the reasons credit students enroll in community colleges and the different characteristics of credit students. The survey responses placed students in one of the six following clusters, by reason for enrolling in a community college: (1) upgrading skills for career advancement; (2) career preparation; (3) to prepare for and change career due to major life change; (4) personal enrichment; (5) transfer only; and (6) leisure or experimental purposes. "Career preparation," "personal enrichment," and "transfer only" were the three highest responses, respectively, from credit students. Most career preparation credit students were enrolled in health-, business-, or computer-related fields, respectively. Most students who listed personal enrichment as the main reason for enrolling in community college also expressed the intent to transfer. Demographics showed that African-American and Hispanic students represented a significant majority of the minority population at community colleges. Most respondents expressed that they were satisfied with the overall education provided by their community college and would recommend attending community college to others. The report includes two references, Web site information, and provides tables with specific statistics for each cluster of credit students. (MKF)

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FACES OF THE FUTURE

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APRIL 2002

A PORTRAIT OF AMERICA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

ED 463 820

Credit Student Analysis: 1999 and 2000

Kim VanDerLinden

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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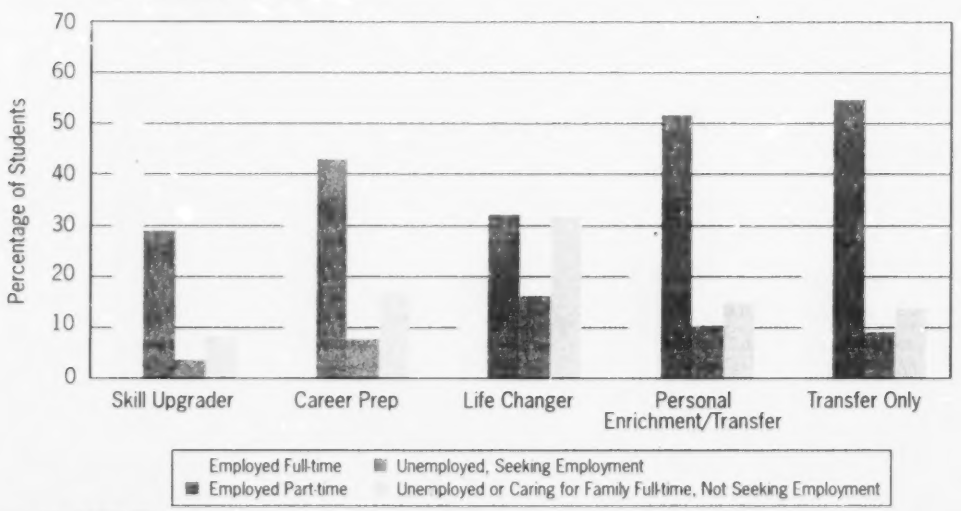
Faces of the Future is a national survey that examines the lives and experiences of community college students. The survey data collected during 1999 and 2000 provide extensive information on approximately 150,000 credit and noncredit students from more than 300 institutions. This report focuses on the reasons credit students enroll in community colleges and the different characteristics of these students. The report examines student life on and off campus and the impact of the community college experience on students' lives. Some key findings include the following:

- Most students preparing for future work are training for careers in health sciences and technologies (30 percent), business-related fields (17 percent), or computer and information technology (15 percent).
- 45 percent of single mothers who enrolled because of a major life change indicated that the cost of childcare or dependent care was a major or moderate problem while taking courses.
- 72 percent of students who enrolled to upgrade skills and advance their careers indicated that community college had made a major contribution to their learning skills required for their job.
- 76 percent who enrolled because of a major life change said the community college experience had increased their academic competence; 66 percent said it had helped them build self-confidence.

FIGURE 1 **STUDENTS' EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS, BY REASON FOR ENROLLING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE**



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Introduction

Community colleges serve a diverse set of learners with differing goals, needs, backgrounds, and life circumstances. Although it may be convenient for institutions and policymakers to categorize students according to the different missions of the community college, students rarely fit neatly into the framework of an occupational, academic, or lifelong learning track. Students may be using the community college to fulfill many goals simultaneously, and their reasons for attending a community college may be complex.

As students make choices related to education, such as where to attend, whether to attend full-time or part-time, and how much money to invest, their reasons for enrolling must be set against the social and economic realities of their lives in order to fully capture their college experience. The Faces of the Future study aims to set students' reasons for attending college into the context of their lives.

Background and Methodology

The American Association of Community Colleges and ACT, Inc., jointly administered the Faces of the Future survey during fall 1999 and fall 2000 and will continue to conduct the survey on an annual basis. Students from more than 300 community colleges participated in the survey during these first two years of data collection. Both credit and noncredit students responded to the survey. For the purposes of this report, discussion is limited to the 100,000 credit students in the study.[1]

Respondents indicated multiple reasons for enrolling at a community college. Researchers grouped the reasons into clusters and then compared the clusters with one another as well as with the overall sample in terms of personal characteristics, enrollment status, and employment patterns. The Faces of the Future study also collected data about student impressions of the helpfulness of certain college services and the impact of the college experience on their lives.

SURVEY RESPONSE CLUSTERS, BY REASON FOR ENROLLING

Cluster 1: Upgrading Skills for Career Advancement (skill upgrader)
The respondents in this cluster enrolled for reasons related to current occupational needs and the desire to advance in current positions.

Cluster 2: Career Preparation (career prep)
Students in this cluster enrolled for reasons related to preparing for a future career.

Cluster 3: Major Life Change (life changer)
Students in this cluster enrolled because of occupational requirements but were set apart by the desire to gain skills, enter the workforce, and find a new career because of a recent major life change.

Cluster 4: Personal Enrichment/Intellectual Development with Intent to Transfer (personal enrichment/transfer)
Respondents in this group of potential transfer students indicated development of the mind and intellectual abilities, the study of new and different subjects, and the opportunity to meet new people as major reasons for attending community college.

Cluster 5: Transfer Only
Students in this cluster appeared more narrowly focused on transfer. They indicated transfer to a four-year college as the primary, and often the only, reason for attending community college.

Cluster 6: No Definite Purpose for Enrolling
Students in this cluster reported less-determined reasons for attending community college and may have been experimenting to see if college life suited them. Because of the relatively small number of students represented in this cluster, it is discussed only briefly in this summary report.

Student Uses of the Community College

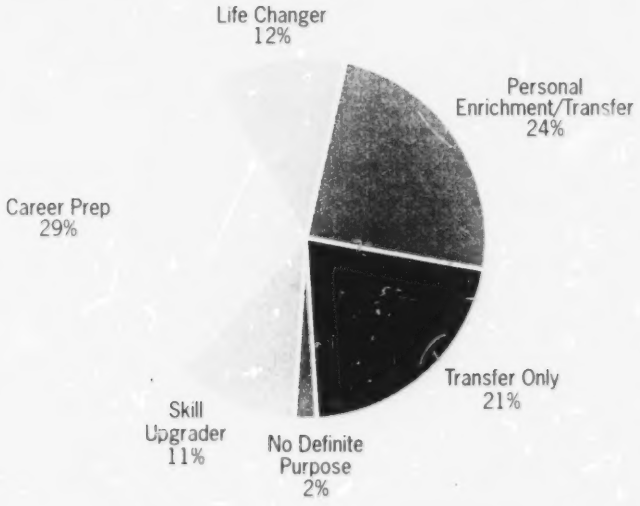
Although students' reasons for attending a community college were multiple and varied, analysis revealed six clusters of students that shared similar reasons for enrolling (Figure 2). The following paragraphs highlight the characteristics of students in each cluster.[2]

Cluster 1: Upgrading Skills for Career Advancement

Approximately 11 percent of respondents enrolled for reasons related to current occupational needs and the desire to advance in current positions *(skill upgraders)*. Students in this cluster share many of the characteristics that describe nontraditional students, such as being over the age of 25 and working full-time while enrolled in classes part-time (Horn 1996). A majority of skill upgraders (58 percent) were 25 years of age or older, with 23 percent over the age of 40. Close to 60 percent of skill upgraders were working full-time while attending college, and a majority were enrolled on a part-time basis. Fifty-eight percent were female, compared with 61 percent female students across all clusters.

Unlike most nontraditional students, however, skill upgraders were more likely than those in other clusters to possess a previously acquired degree or certification. Thirteen percent had a vocational or technical certificate, 10 percent had an associate or other two-year degree, 6 percent had a bachelor's degree, and

FIGURE 2 **REASON FOR ENROLLING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE**



Note: Total does not equal 100% because of rounding.

[1] Approximately 29 percent of credit students in the sample had also taken one or more noncredit courses at their present college, but only 3 percent were simultaneously enrolled in both credit and noncredit courses at the time of the survey.

[2] Approximately 12 percent of the total sample of credit students were excluded from the cluster analysis and are not included in this report. Some cases were excluded because of missing data or data that could not be interpreted. In addition, the analysis was limited to students pursuing postsecondary education credits; thus students whose only reason for attending was to obtain a GED or high school diploma were also excluded.

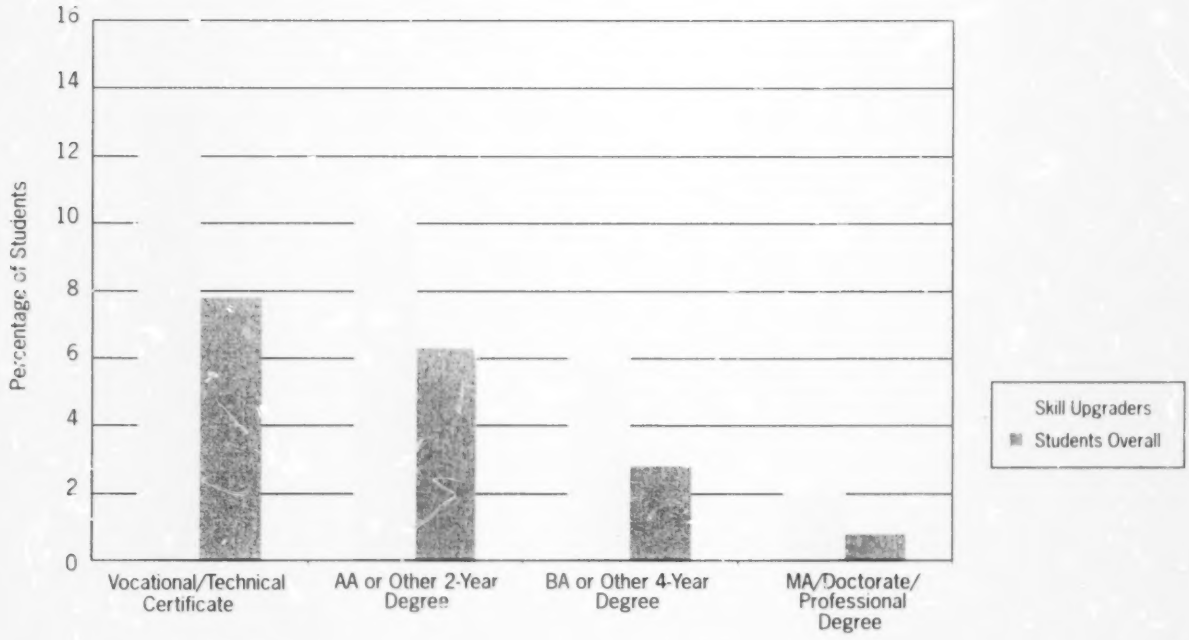
2 percent had a master's, doctoral, or first professional degree (Figure 3). Of those skill upgraders who did not already possess a degree, nearly 50 percent indicated an interest in obtaining an associate degree, and 30 percent indicated an interest in obtaining a four-year degree, although their primary reasons for enrolling were occupational.

On the job, skill upgraders predominantly worked weekdays (63 percent), while 14 percent worked night or overnight shifts. Respondents in this cluster worked more hours than did students in the other clusters. The majority worked more than 30 hours per week, and close to 10 percent worked more than 59 hours per week. Forty-four percent of skill upgraders who were enrolled in classes full-time worked between 31 and 50 hours per week, and 6 percent of full-time enrollees worked more than 50 hours per week.

More than 70 percent of skill upgraders indicated that advancing in their current career was a major or moderate reason for taking classes. The largest percentage of skill upgraders (26 percent) were employed in a variety of business-related fields. Some 25 percent of skill upgraders had been in their current occupational positions for five years or more. As their primary field of work, 15 percent of skill upgraders indicated health professions or health specialties and technologies, 11 percent indicated education, and 7 percent indicated computer and information technologies or communication technologies.

Many students in this cluster were receiving help from their employers in paying for

FIGURE 3 **SKILL UPGRADERS WITH DEGREES OR CERTIFICATES**



college (Figure 4) and were more likely to receive employer support than students in the other clusters. Twenty-two percent reported that their employer paid tuition in full, while another 15 percent indicated their employer paid partial tuition. When asked whether job-related responsibilities were a problem while taking classes, 26 percent of skill upgraders indicated that the mix of classes and work was a minor problem, 22 percent said it was a moderate problem, and 13 percent said it was a major problem. Approximately 10 percent indicated they were taking courses because their employer required them to do so.

Forty-two percent of skill upgraders were first-generation students. Twenty-three percent were married with no children, 22 percent were married with children, and 8 percent were single parents.

Cluster 2: Career Preparation

Twenty-nine percent of credit students in the sample attended community college in order to prepare for future careers *(career prep)*. Forty-two percent were 21 years of age or younger. Thirty-one percent were in their mid to late twenties, and 17 percent were in their thirties. Ten percent were over 40. Sixty-five percent of career prep students were women, compared with 61 percent women in the entire sample and 58 percent skill upgraders.

Although the term *career prep* may seem to imply that these students were not currently employed, the majority were working while preparing for future careers. Forty-three percent were employed part-time and 32 percent were employed full-time, but current work needs were not listed as reasons for attending. Ninety percent of the career

FIGURE 4 **SKILL UPGRADERS RECEIVING EMPLOYER SUPPORT**

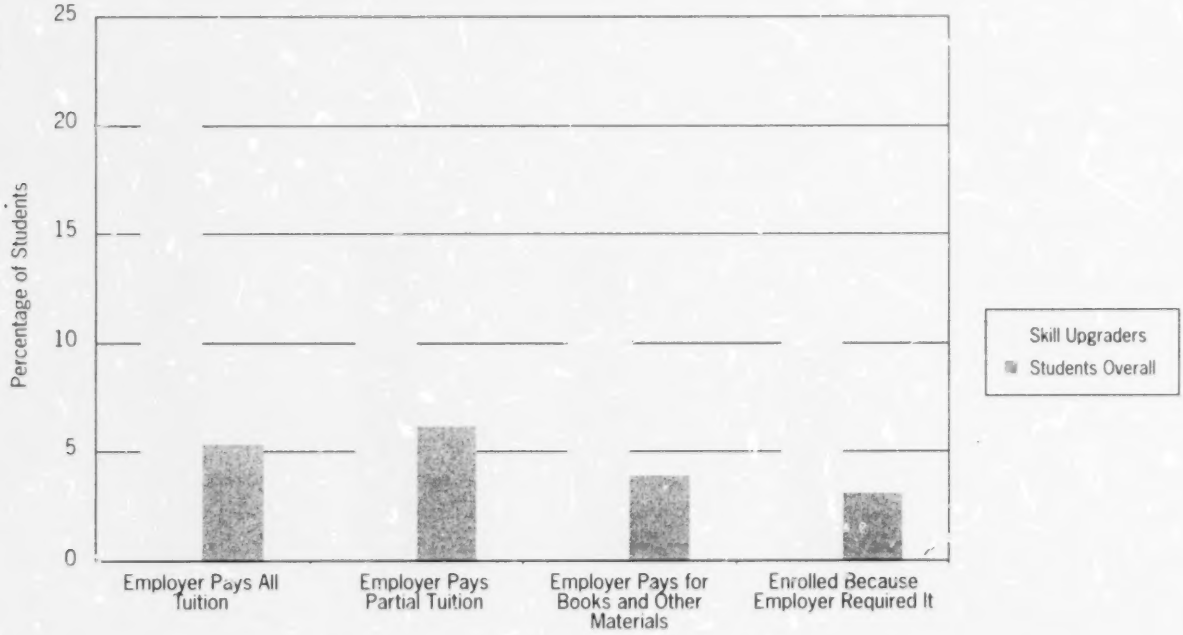
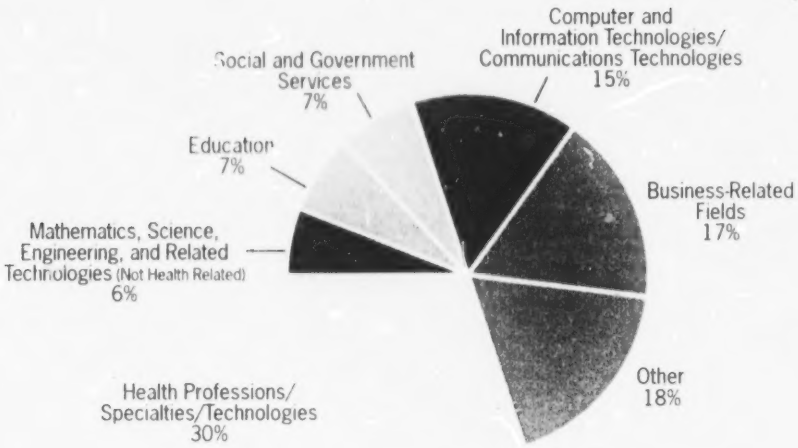


FIGURE 5 **FIELDS FOR WHICH CAREER PREP STUDENTS TRAIN**


Computer and Information Technologies/ Communications Technologies 15%
Social and Government Services 7%
Education 7%
Business-Related Fields 17%
Mathematics, Science, Engineering, and Related Technologies (Not Health Related) 6%
Other 18%
Health Professions/ Specialties/Technologies 30%

prep group indicated that increasing their earning potential was a major or moderate reason for taking classes. Unlike the skill upgraders, students making use of the community college for reasons related to career preparation and future work were primarily attending college full-time.

Some students in this cluster had already obtained a vocational or technical certificate (11 percent) or another kind of two-year or four-year college degree (10 percent). Of those who did not already possess a degree, 63 percent wanted to obtain an associate degree en route to their future career, and 10 percent indicated completion of a vocational/technical program as a reason for attending.

Thirty percent of the students in career prep indicated they were training for health professions or health specialties and technologies. Seventeen percent were preparing for careers in business-related fields, 15 percent in computer and information technologies or communication technologies, and 7 percent in education. Another 7 percent indicated social and government services as the field for which they were training (Figure 5).

Thirty-nine percent of the career prep students were living with their parents, and 39 percent were first-generation college students. Thirty-four percent were married, and 9 percent were single parents.

Cluster 3: Major Life Change

While students in the major life change category *(life changers)* indicated reasons related to occupational needs, they are set apart from the previous cluster by their desire to acquire skills, enter the workforce, and find a new career because of a recent major life change. Students in this category accounted for approximately 12 percent of respondents in the study, and they share many characteristics of nontraditional student populations (Horn 1996).

Sixty-six percent of life changers were over the age of 25, and 27 percent were over the age of 40. Whereas 52 percent of students in this cluster indicated they were employed

either full- or part-time, 17 percent indicated they were responsible for their family and home on a full-time basis. Sixteen percent indicated they were unemployed and seeking employment, while 15 percent were unemployed and not seeking employment. The majority of life changers were enrolled in college full-time.

Forty-seven percent of life changers were first-generation college students, and 23 percent were single parents. Fourteen percent indicated that English was not their primary language, and 12 percent indicated that the GED was their highest earned degree. Sixty-five percent of life changers were female. Fourteen percent of life changers were African American, and 10 percent were Hispanic or Latino (Figure 6).

Approximately 20 percent of life changers indicated that a major reason for enrolling was a desire to enter the workforce after their children were grown. Relative to the total sample, many of the life changers experienced a change or loss of job, marriage, birth or adoption of a child, death of a family member, or a major illness during the previous two years. Eighteen percent indicated they had recently gone through a divorce or separation (Figure 7). Of life changers with children, more than 60 percent said that attending to family responsibilities while taking classes was a major or moderate problem.

Of the life changers who reported total household annual income, more than 25 percent reported an income of less than $15,000. Life changers indicated a high reliance on financial aid and public assistance, and they experienced more financial burdens while enrolled than did students in other clusters. Fifty-eight percent had experienced major or

FIGURE 6 **RACIAL/ETHNIC BACKGROUND OF MINORITY STUDENTS, BY REASON FOR ENROLLING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

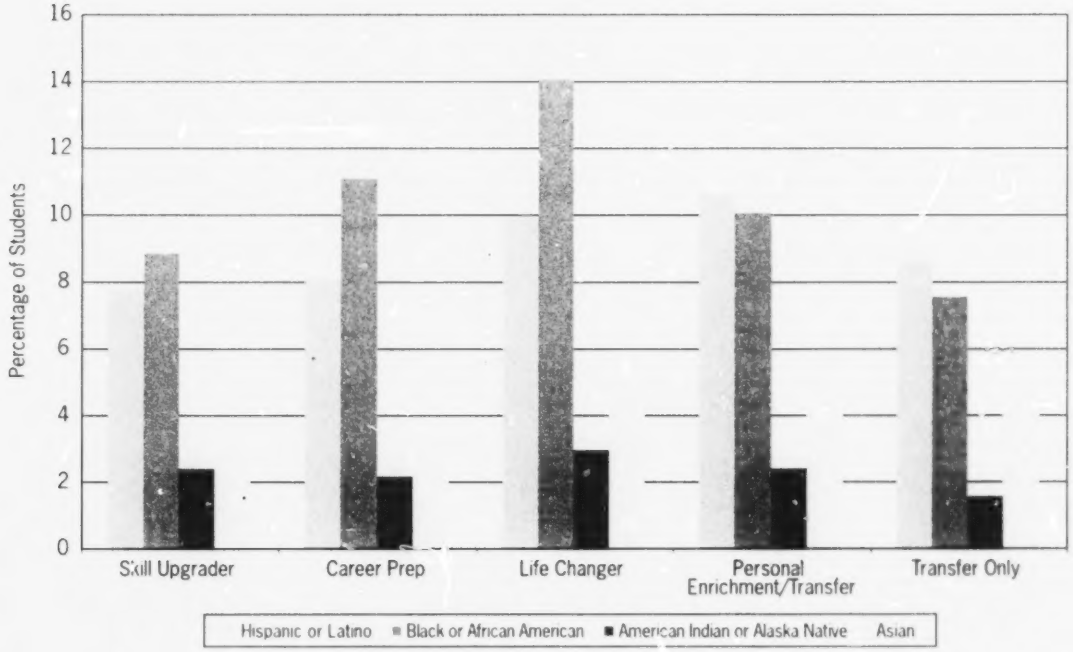
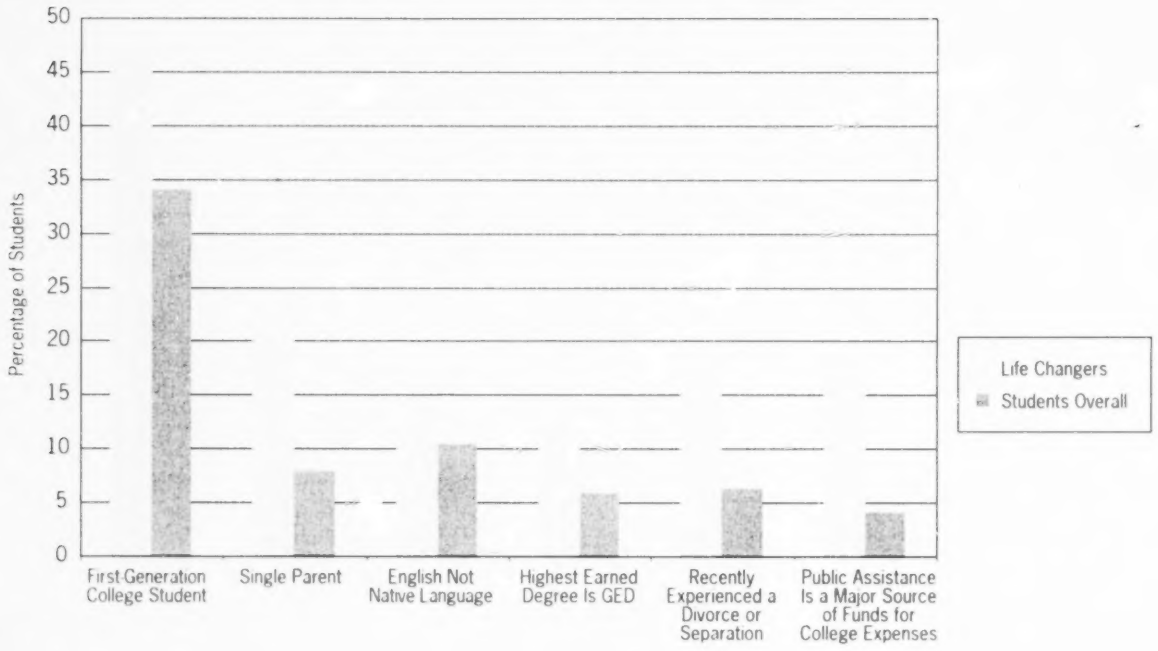


FIGURE 7 **CHARACTERISTICS OF LIFE CHANGERS**



moderate personal financial problems. Fifty-seven percent indicated that financial aid was a major source of funding, and 19 percent indicated that public assistance was a major source of funding.

Forty-five percent of life changers who were single mothers, and 35 percent who were married and had children under age 17, indicated that the cost of childcare or dependent care was a major or moderate problem while taking courses. Forty-three percent had major or moderate problems related to purchasing or acquiring access to a computer, 38 percent indicated that the cost of books and related materials was a major or moderate problem, and 31 percent indicated that the cost of transportation was a major or moderate problem while studying at a community college (Figure 8).

Cluster 4: Personal Enrichment/ Intellectual Development with Intent to Transfer

While taking courses for personal enrichment tended to be a common reason across all clusters, relative to the total sample the *personal enrichment/transfer* cluster was more likely to indicate development of the mind and intellectual abilities, the study of new and different subjects, and the opportunity to meet new people as major reasons for attending community college. Furthermore, 81 percent of personal enrichment/transfers indicated transfer to a four-year institution as a reason for taking preparatory courses, but only 22 percent indicated obtaining an associate degree as a reason for enrolling. Students in this cluster were younger than those in the career-related clusters (Figure 9). Eighty

FIGURE 8 **STUDENTS INDICATING EACH ITEM AS A PROBLEM WHILE ENROLLED IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

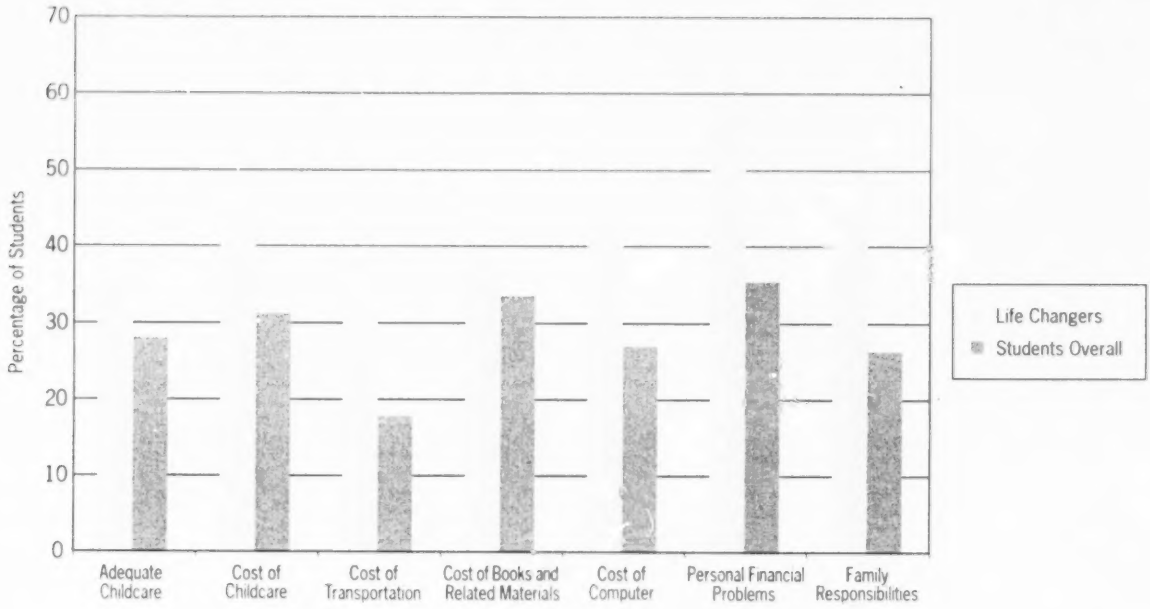


FIGURE 9 **AGE RANGES OF STUDENTS, BY REASON FOR ENROLLING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

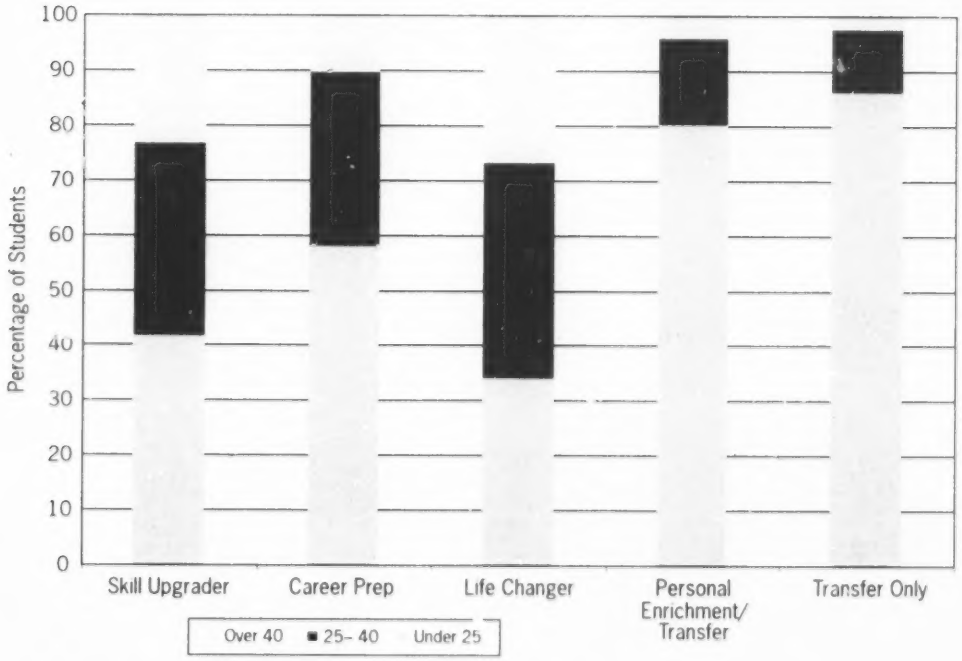
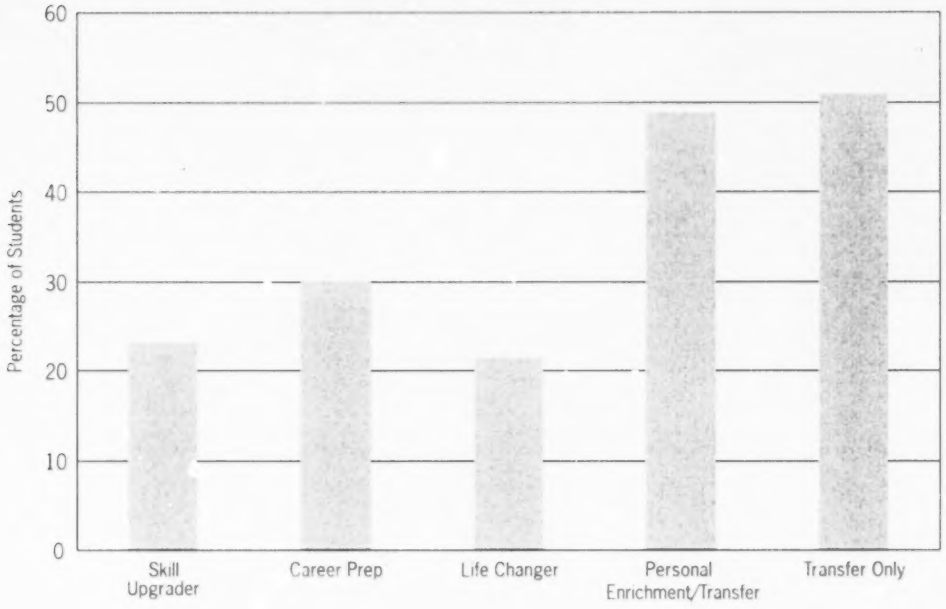


FIGURE 10 **STUDENTS IDENTIFYING PARENTAL INCOME AS A MAJOR OR MODERATE SOURCE OF FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXPENSES**



percent were under 25 years old, and approximately 24 percent of credit students in the study fell into this cluster.

Although 52 percent of personal enrichment/transfers were employed part-time and 22 percent were employed full-time, no students in this cluster indicated they were enrolled for reasons related to their current work. Forty-one percent listed parental or family influence as a major or moderate reason for taking courses.

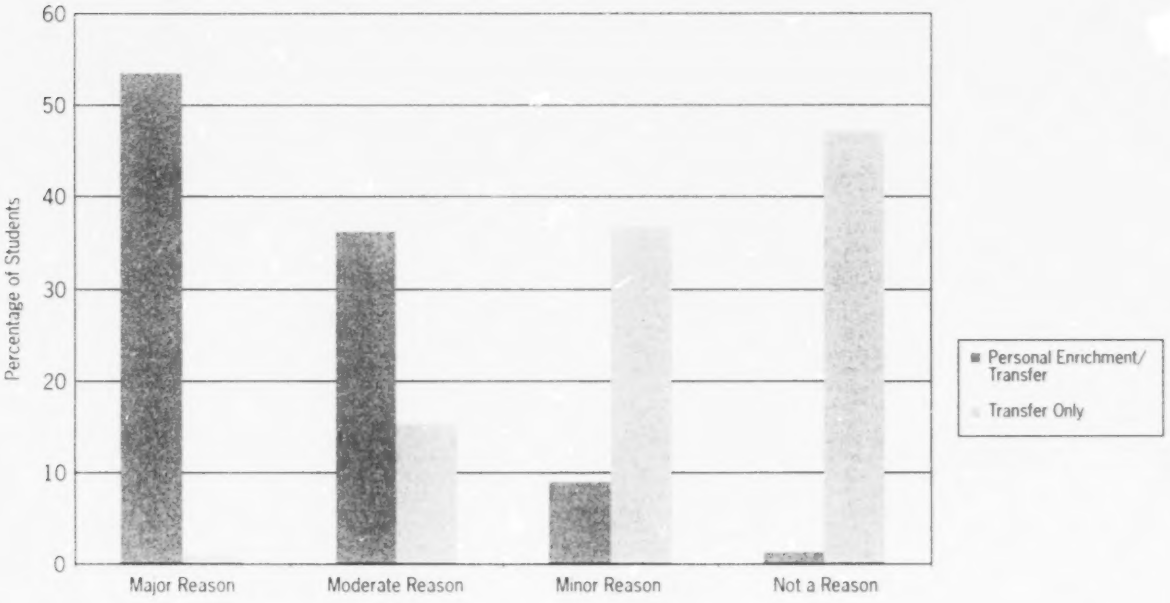
This cluster appears similar to traditional college student populations, as the majority of personal enrichment/transfers were enrolled full-time. Less than 10 percent of students in this cluster had children. Fifty-seven percent lived with their parent(s), and 49 percent relied on parental income or savings as a major or moderate source of funding for their education (Figure 10). Forty-three percent indicated relying on some form of financial aid. Thirty-three percent were relying primarily on their own income and savings.

Cluster 5: Transfer Only

Students in the *transfer only* category were similar to the personal enrichment/ transfer cluster in several ways. Students shared the desire to transfer to a four-year institution, although students in the transfer only cluster did not express the same desire to develop their minds, study new subjects, and meet new people (Figure 11). Instead, these students appeared more narrowly focused on transfer. They indicated transfer to a four-year college as the primary, and often only, reason for attending community college. Approximately 21 percent of credit students were found in this cluster.

More than 86 percent of students in the transfer only cluster were 25 years old or younger, and 63 percent lived with their parent(s). Fifty-five percent were working part-

FIGURE 11 **TRANSFER STUDENTS REPORTING "TO STUDY NEW AND DIFFERENT SUBJECTS" AS REASON FOR ENROLLING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE**



time and 22 percent full-time, but they did not indicate work-related reasons as motivators for enrolling in the community college.

This cluster contains the fewest first-generation students, with only 24 percent indicating that neither parent had attended college. The cluster also contains the smallest percentage of single parents (3.3 percent). More than 50 percent of transfer only students reported parental income as a major or moderate source for covering college costs. More than 37 percent indicated financial aid as a major source of funding. Twenty-nine percent were relying on their own income and savings to pay for college.

Cluster 6: No Definite Purpose for Enrolling

Some students enroll in community college with no clearly identified reasons for attending. Sometimes called "experimenters" (Grubb 1991), these students may enter community college just to see whether post-secondary education suits them. In this sample of credit enrollees, 2 percent indicated they had no definite purpose for attending community college. Because this percentage is so small, this population of students will not be analyzed in great detail.

The majority of students in this cluster were in their late teens to early twenties. Thirty-eight percent were between the ages of 20 and 24, and 29 percent were 18 or 19 years old. Fifty percent were employed part-time, 23 percent full-time. The majority were enrolled in college full-time. Forty-nine percent had yet to complete any credits at their present institution.

Experiences at Community College

The descriptive clusters provide valuable information about why students attend community college, but they do not describe actual experiences on campus. The Faces of the Future survey asked a variety of questions related to instruction and campus processes such as registration and advising. Students were also asked whether their experiences at the community college had contributed to their personal and professional growth. While the data do not provide institutional outcomes regarding graduation or retention rates, they do provide valuable information about how students are interacting with the campus environment and how the experience is contributing to their lives.

College Processes and Instruction

Students with varying reasons for attending also have a variety of experiences on campus. Negotiating a campus's terrain and administrative processes may be more difficult for some students, depending on their competing life circumstances and additional pressures such as family or job-related responsibilities. Many community colleges have introduced "one-stop shopping" and online student services to help make necessary procedures easy and accessible to all student populations. Such efforts are reflected in the responses of the Faces of the Future participants with regard to availability of courses at needed times, availability of computing facilities and services, and complexity of registration processes.

Approximately 60 percent of all credit students surveyed agreed that courses were available at needed times. More than 65 percent agreed that computer services and facilities were available at needed times, and similar percentages agreed that the registration process was easily negotiated.

Students were less affirming when it came to rating both the help received from the financial aid office and the quality of academic advising. Students enrolled for reasons related to a major life change, however, did rate these items positively (Figure 12).

FIGURE 12 **STUDENTS REPORTING THAT ACADEMIC ADVISING IS OF HIGH QUALITY**

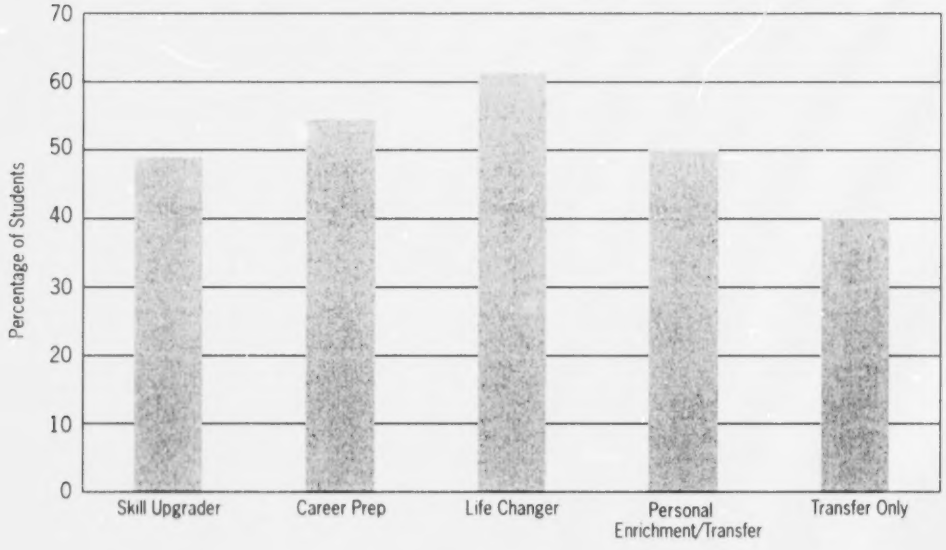


FIGURE 13 **STUDENTS INDICATING COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXPERIENCE MADE A MAJOR CONTRIBUTION IN HELPING IDENTIFY REQUIRED CAREER TRAINING AND SKILLS**

Even given the wide array of programs, a majority of students in each cluster reported that instruction was of high quality, that instructors were available outside of class, and that their programs of study were sufficiently challenging.

Overall, the responses revealed only small variations among student clusters, but student age did affect the ratings of campus experiences. As age increased, positive ratings of most campus experiences also increased. This pattern held true throughout the student groupings and may account for some of the variation among the clusters.

Experiences Related to Personal and Professional Growth

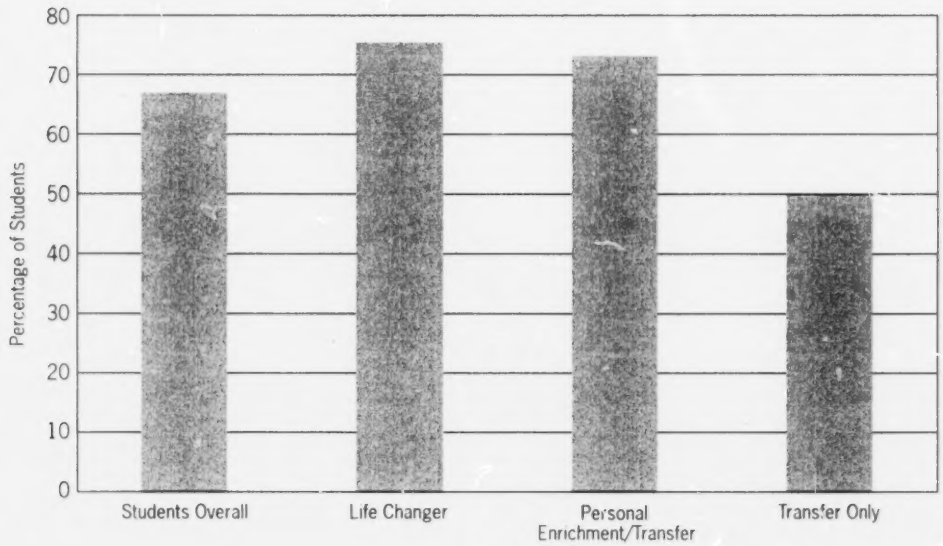
Students were asked whether commu-nity college experiences contributed to their growth in a number of areas related to learning and skill acquisition. The following percentages are limited to those students who had completed at least one full term or a credit course at their present institution.

Seventy-two percent of skill upgraders indicated that the community college experience had made a major contribution to their learning skills specifically required for their current job. Fifty-five percent of skill upgraders reported that their community college experience helped them identify the training and skills required for career opportunities.

Sixty-one percent of career prep students reported that the community college experience had made a major contribution to their acquisition of training and skills required for career opportunities (Figure 13). Approximately one-third of both skill upgraders and career prep students indicated that the community college experience was helping them increase their computer skills for work-related tasks. Nearly 40 percent of both clusters reported that their community college experience had made a major contribution to their communication skills in the workplace.

Students enrolled for reasons related to a major life change also believed that the community college experience had made major contributions to their lives in many areas. Seventy-six percent of life changers reported that the community college experience had increased their academic competence, 67

FIGURE 14 **STUDENTS INDICATING COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXPERIENCE MADE A MAJOR CONTRIBUTION TO ACADEMIC GROWTH AND COMPETENCE**



percent said the experience had enriched their intellectual lives, and 66 percent reported that the community college experience helped develop their self-confidence. As with the students in the skill upgrader and career prep clusters, life changers saw the community college experience as making a major contribution to their work-related skills. More than 75 percent of life changers indicated they were acquiring skills needed for future work, and 48 percent of life changers indicated that the community college experience was helping them acquire computer skills for work-related tasks.

Students enrolled for personal enrichment/transfer reasons also indicated that the community college experience had made a major contribution to enriching their intellectual lives (66 percent), developing their self-confidence (57 percent), and increasing their academic competence (73 percent). Students in the transfer only category, however, were less likely to indicate that the community college experience was making major contributions to their personal or professional growth. Fifty percent indicated they were increasing their academic competence (Figure 14), 27 percent said the community college was helping them to develop self-confidence, and 32 percent said the experience was enriching their intellectual lives. The wide variation between the two transfer clusters further illustrates that although these groups are similar in age, employment, and enrollment status, they differ in ways that result in differing experiences at the community college.

Overall Satisfaction with the Community College Experience

Regardless of their reasons for enrolling, community college students were satisfied when asked about the overall experience. Eighty-seven percent of skill upgraders and career prep students, 86 percent of life changers, 84 percent of personal enrichment/transfers, and 78 percent of transfers indicated they were very satisfied or satisfied with their particular community college. Similar percentages indicated they would recommend their college to friends and relatives.

Conclusion

Community college students are often categorized as being on the lifelong learning, academic, or occupational track. The Faces of the Future data suggest that students' reasons for enrolling are multiple and complex. As institutions make decisions and initiate new programs or services, they should consider the full range of possible reasons that students enroll. The Faces of the Future findings may help colleges present a more complete picture of student success and institutional effectiveness, which cannot always be measured by standard outcomes criteria such as graduation rates.

Examining reasons for enrolling, as well as the life circumstances of students, may also help colleges meet their educational and occupational needs. For example, a student enrolled for skills upgrade in a current employment position may have different developmental needs and expectations than a student enrolled to gain skills and prepare for future work. Skill upgraders may have no intention of attending once a desired skill has been acquired; therefore, this cluster of students possibly should be excluded from some of the important institutional statistics related to student persistence and retention since a successful outcome is essentially achieved once the student has learned the skill.

Transfer behavior continues to dominate the literature and research related to community college students. Although in two of the student clusters transfer to a four-year college or university was a prevailing reason for enrolling, some important differences surfaced between the two groups, differences that bring up further questions. Are students who indicate transfer and personal enrichment more likely to transfer to a four-year college than those who are more narrowly focused on transfer and seem less interested in developing their minds, studying new subjects, and meeting new people? How might the apparent differences between these two groups, with regard to their on-campus experiences, alter how institutions structure or initiate contact with students in academic advising and other student-centered activities?

Students who enrolled because of a major life change warrant particular attention from institutional leaders, faculty, staff, and policymakers. Life changers in this sample were more likely than students in other clusters to be first-generation college students, to be single parents, and to have annual incomes below $15,000. Even with these possible personal and financial burdens, life changers overwhelmingly reported positive experiences on-campus and perceive that the community college experience was making a significant contribution to their personal and professional growth.

By providing information on students' experiences and life circumstances, the Faces of the Future data help to present a comprehensive picture of how students use community colleges to meet their needs. The analysis presented here reveals that even with multiple and varying reasons for attending, students are having positive experiences at community colleges and are successfully combining their occupational needs and educational intentions with personal responsibilities and other demanding life circumstances.

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